



Washington State Senator

DON BENTON

2001 Legislative Session Report AN UPDATE FROM THE 17TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



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Labor, Commerce &
Financial Institutions;
Transportation, ranking
Republican

Special Committees:
World War II Memorial
Advisory Committee;
Vice Chairman,
Legislative Transportation
Committee

Transportation

It's no secret the transportation system in our area is one of the worst in the nation. In fact, the Vancouver-Portland area recently ranked 8th in the U.S. for most traffic congestion by the Texas Transportation Institute.

A major contributing factor — the Vancouver area is one of the most rapidly growing areas in the nation. The 2000 census figures show our population has skyrocketed over 200 percent from that of 10 years ago. In that time, waste and neglect have resulted in little transportation infrastructure improvements.

Continued waste and neglect will only worsen our transportation system the longer we wait to fix it. Keeping the status quo means making people late for work in the morning and holding people back from their families in the evening. It means keeping people and valuable freight stuck in traffic, contributing to the loss of time and money for the people and businesses of our state.

continued inside.....

On the inside.....

- **Transportation**

— How often do you see empty or nearly empty buses? How often are you stuck on the congested freeway as the HOV lane remains unused?

- **Education**

— This new law will work to bring the focused knowledge of those in the workforce into the classroom.

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Where is the waste coming from?

The Department of Transportation (DOT) consistently falls short on projects sufficiently funded by the Legislature. Too often, important projects are extended or delayed by the DOT as they run over budget. This means a repeated waste of your tax dollars and no congestion relief.

To make matters worse, liberal social engineers have led many to believe that transit and high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes are the answer to our state's crumbling transportation system. They argue the use of HOV lanes and transit will ease the number of cars on the road, freeing up traffic for those who drive. Liberal lawmakers are convinced

and willing to shell out a huge chunk of your transportation dollars on these so-called fixes. This philosophy, which has prevailed over the last 15 years, is exactly what has created the current deficiencies in our highway system.

How often do you see empty or nearly empty buses? How often are you stuck on the congested freeway as the HOV lane remains unused? Clearly, these are experiments with admirable intentions that have not only failed miserably, but have worked to exacerbate rather than resolve gridlock. To continue to pour more money into a system that refuses to conform to realistic solutions is insane.

The Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (RTC)

Regardless of where you live in Southwest Washington, someone from your community sits on the RTC. This local agency is partly responsible for continuing these failed policies and I think it is important for you to know who serves on it.

Most recently, the RTC unanimously made the decision to continue with the plan that will restrict the newest lane on I-5 to HOV only, refusing to adjust the original HOV user projections, even though it was clear that they had been inflated. Again, solutions that work to hurt, not help.

Wasn't the legislative transportation package going to help?

It could have, but the primary answer to our region's gridlock is more highway capacity (asphalt). We must build more roads and expand our existing roads. Even buses benefit from more roads. Unfortunately, those who continue to advocate for the expansion of HOV lanes and public transit over roads ended up creating a package so fraught with ongoing waste that many of my colleagues and I could not support it.

Republicans are very reluctant to support the negotiated package despite knowing how much a transportation fix is desperately needed. The hefty price tag on the package forced us to think long and hard about priorities. If the package does not include priorities that will work to truly alleviate traffic congestion, we are not willing to ask the people of our state to foot the bill.

Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (RTC)

Chair: Charles Crumpacker, *Washougal Mayor*

Vice Chair: Arch Miller, *Port of Vancouver Commissioner*

Judie Stanton, *Clark County Commissioner*

Craig Pridemore, *Clark County Commissioner*

Betty Sue Morris, *Clark County Commissioner*

Royce Pollard, *Vancouver Mayor*

Thayer Rorabaugh, *Vancouver Transportation Services Manager*

Bill Ganley, *Battle Ground Mayor*

Bob Talent, *Skamania County Commissioner*

Don Wagner, *WSDOT SW WA Regional Administrator*

Alternate: Dean Dossett, *Camas Mayor*

In addition, there are two Oregon officials on the RTC.

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What's more, if the people of Washington are going to be asked in the future to pay for a major transportation fix, we must let them decide — a significant provision left out in this transportation package.

In a recent 17th Legislative District questionnaire, over 75 percent who responded demanded that decisions about new taxes to fund transportation solutions be put on the ballot for voters to decide, a position I adamantly support.

This was the one constant throughout negotiations. When session began, the governor gave his word that such a transportation fix should go to a vote of the people. Since then, he has gone back on his word, a deal breaker for many lawmakers involved.

What can we do to get Washington moving again?

While some citizens use and benefit from HOV lanes and public transit, they can't do the job alone. Open roads are the primary way out of this mess. As our population continues to mushroom, problems are only going to get worse if we do not look forward and move ahead with construction of new lanes and the opening of existing HOV lanes to all traffic.

If we can accomplish this, we can begin to build back the trust of our citizens and get Washington moving again!



As the ranking Republican of the Senate Transportation Committee, Sen. Benton frequently speaks on the Senate floor about transportation issues significant to the state.

EDUCATION

We made some real positive moves for education this year. The Legislature increased funding for education by approximately \$700 million. This includes increased salaries and cost-of-living adjustments for teachers and all state-funded school employees, as well as class-size reduction efforts.

Two very important measures that passed this session are expected to have a positive impact on our schools by directly addressing the teacher shortage.

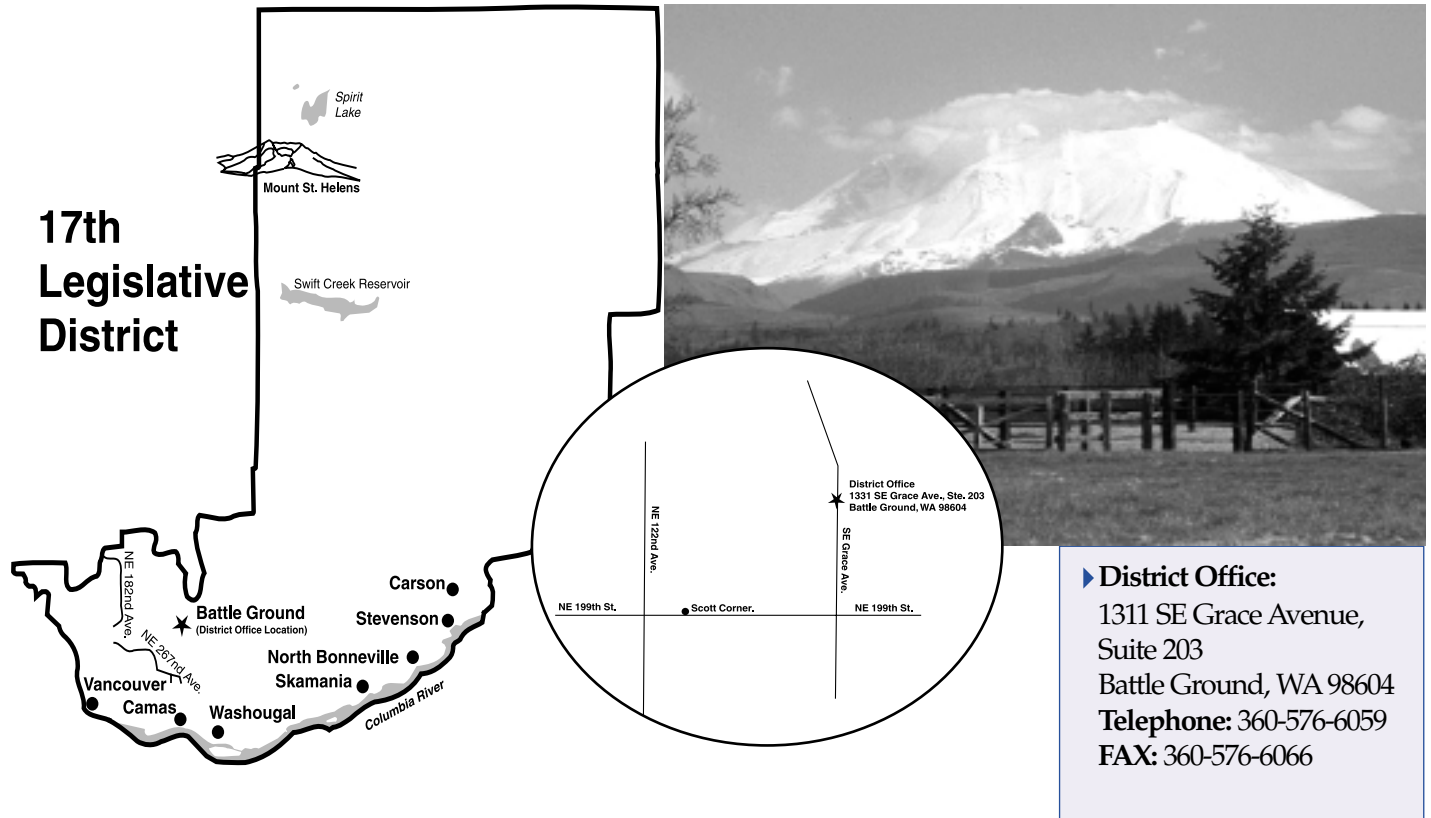
- **Senate Bill 5937** brings retired teachers back into the classroom by revising the pension system to allow them to be rehired without penalizing their retirement benefits.
- **Senate Bill 5695** adds more teachers to the system by allowing those who have five years of workforce experience and are not currently employed by a school district to be eligible for teacher certification. This new law will work to bring the focused knowledge of those in the workforce into the classroom.

School accountability was another important education issue addressed this session. Of most concern were: choice for parents of children in failing schools, and the state's consistent practice of usurping the power of school districts rather than allowing them to deal with school failures at the local level.

Unfortunately, the Democrat majority blocked all efforts to seriously improve failing schools and no bill was passed. However, \$2.8 million was provided to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to conduct education audits of low-performing schools. Each educational audit will include recommendations for best practices and ways to address identified needs.

I am pleased we were able to increase compensation to those who dedicate their lives to teach our children along with other gains we were able to make in education this session, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. I will continue to work to hold schools accountable and ensure results from our public education system. Our children deserve no less!

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A 2001 Session Report from your Senator

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